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The Democratic Labor Party: its vote, candidates and campaigns in the Riverina region, 1957-71

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Abstract

This article examines the influence of the Democratic Labor Party (DLP) in the Riverina region of New South Wales during the period 1957 to 1971. It assesses the impact of the DLP vote on election outcomes and suggests that, within this region, the DLP was a less significant factor in the erosion of the Australian Labor Party vote. In spite of strong links to the Victorian DLP through Wagga Wagga’s Bishop Francis Henschke and the National Catholic Rural Movement, its supporters never managed to marshal ‘the Catholic vote’ across the entire region. And while sectarian interests and anti-communism were factors, the article demonstrates that the party’s success in achieving a higher proportion of votes in some electorates than state or national averages can also be attributed to the personalities of the candidates and their espousal of campaign issues directly relevant to their rural electors.

Introduction

The Democratic Labor Party (DLP) was formed during the period 1955-57 as a breakaway party from the Australian Labor Party (ALP). It formally came into being in New South Wales on 29 September 1956, but its roots were in Victoria from where the Catholic Social Studies Movement (‘the Movement’), led by B.A. Santamaria and nurtured by Archbishop Daniel Mannix, operated ‘with the highly charged and somewhat elastic purpose of making the labour movement impervious to communist influence’.1 During the last years of World War Two Santamaria and his supporters encouraged the creation of ‘groups’ within a number of trade unions to combat communist influences. The ‘groupers’ were critical of Dr H.V. Evatt’s leadership of the ALP, the influence exerted on the party by trade unions and the links those unions had with the Communist Party of Australia. Evatt regarded the groupers and the

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Movement as a Catholic conspiracy against his leadership and, in 1954, issued a press statement threatening to ‘discipline’ them. The decision at the party’s Hobart federal conference in March 1955 to exclude a grouper delegation from Victoria and admit an anti-grouper delegation from the same state infuriated sections of the ALP. Seven Victorian Labor politicians and a Tasmanian senator thereupon defected to form the Anti-Communist Labor Party (later reformed as the DLP). In Victoria one third of Labor politicians joined the break-away party, leading to the collapse of John Cain senior’s government. But in NSW the Labor premier J.J. Cahill, with strong backing from Cardinal Norman Gilroy and the Catholic hierarchy, managed to retain many of the groupers, forcing the DLP to seek support from outside ALP ranks.

Most historical writing about the DLP adopts an unapologetically metropolitan focus, giving particular attention to the situation in Victoria and altogether ignoring regional New South Wales. The present article takes a first step to redressing this neglect by considering whether the DLP played a significant role in eroding support for the ALP in the Riverina region of New South Wales. Hagan, Turner and Blacklow identify it and the Catholic community which supported it as a ‘cultural feature’ of Wagga Wagga’s political landscape, but attach greater importance to ‘changing features of its sub-economies’ in determining political behaviour and outcomes at elections. Eather, however, contends that the DLP’s takeover of Wagga Wagga’s ALP branch was a ‘major’ factor working against electoral success. It had direct impacts for the reason that voters in Wagga Wagga were caught up in what he brands an ‘anti-community frenzy’ and thus receptive to the local DLP supporters’ view that ‘the Evatt party had not only given up the fight against Communism, but [were] … openly collaborating the with Communist Party’. Long term consequences were a slump in the ALP’s share of the total vote and the loss (‘never regained’) of ‘the Catholic vote in the city’. In reaching this conclusion, he underscores the findings of historians who argue that the Labor split ‘converted previously ALP voting Catholics into effective voters [through DLP preference distribution] for the Liberal Party’. It generally is assumed that this realignment of Catholic voting behaviour was strongest in Victoria; in New South Wales ‘the majority of Catholic Labor voters … continued to support the ALP’. But whereas 1.27 per cent of the New South Wales electorate voted DLP in the 1959 state election, the corresponding figures in the seats of Wagga Wagga and Murrumbidgee were 7.1 per cent and 4.4 per cent respectively.
The present paper attempts to widen debate and offer a more nuanced interpretation by analysing votes cast in elections during the period 1957-71 in the state electorates of Wagga Wagga and Murrumbidgee (centred on Griffith) and the federal electorates of Farrer (embracing Wagga Wagga and Albury) and Riverina (embracing Griffith and Leeton). It suggests reasons for the higher percentage of DLP votes cast in Riverina electorates; identifies characteristics of Riverina Catholic communities which may have enhanced or restricted DLP influence; highlights the importance of candidates’ personalities and the quality of their campaigns in determining election outcomes; and points to a possible correlation between the kinds of campaigns conducted and fluctuations in the DLP vote.

Researchers studying the DLP in the Riverina confront ‘the fog of war’. There is hardly any relevant archival material, so the primary sources are electoral statistics and newspaper reports. The latter provide some indication of the structure and themes of campaigns, but give little insight into the machinations of preselection. Voting figures alone do little to further an understanding of elector makeup and rationales. But the figures are sufficient to demonstrate that the DLP was less of a force of contention in the region than hitherto has been thought.

Analysis of voting
Analysis of voting in the federal electorates of Riverina and Farrer reveals that in both the DLP vote was consistently higher than the New South Wales average. However, there was a marked disparity between the two electorates, with the DLP in 1958 capturing close to eleven per cent of the Farrer vote and almost six per cent of the Riverina vote. State-wide the DLP average for the 1958 federal election was 5.6 per cent. A similar trend is evident in the 1963 federal election, with the DLP gaining 9.4 per cent of the vote in Farrer and somewhat more than six per cent in Riverina. The equivalent state average was then 4.4 per cent. By 1969 the DLP was in decline in federal seats, with its vote in Farrer reduced to 7.4 per cent, its vote in Riverina down to four per cent and its state average cut to 3.4 per cent.

The source of DLP votes can be identified by comparing primary voting returns for 1955 and 1958 in both Riverina and Farrer. In Riverina at the 1958 election ALP losses to the DLP were negligible (0.4 per cent) with most of the DLP vote being transferred directly from Hugh S. Roberton, the Country Party’s sitting member. Roberton had won the seat from the ALP in 1949 and had retained it in 1955
in a two-way contest in which he received 59.3 per cent of the valid primary vote. The 1958 election saw Roberton’s share decline to 53.8 per cent and the DLP secure almost six per cent of votes cast. Judging from his haughty comments to reporters about electors being ‘under grave misapprehensions concerning the duties and functions of the Federal Parliament’, it can be conjectured that he believed he had been subjected to a protest vote: an interpretation given some weight by the comments of a scrutineer who told the *Area News* that ‘the great bulk of the DLP candidate’s second preferences’ were directed back to the sitting member.11 ‘The DLP was often a party of protest’, as Allan observes, citing evidence that non-Catholic voters in middle class urban electorates used it to signal dissatisfaction with particular Liberal government policies.12

With the exception of a single election in 1961, outcomes in the seat of Riverina during the period under review were not dependent on preferences. The DLP vote remained around six or seven per cent, rising to 8.1 per cent in 1966 when the ALP (running two endorsed candidates) lost 7.4 per cent of its vote to Roberton’s Country Party successor, A.A. Armstrong, and 1.4 per cent to the DLP. However, Roberton had been forced to second preferences in the close-run 1961 federal election, after shedding six per cent of his primary vote, nearly three-quarters of it to the ALP. The DLP vote increased to 7.75 per cent, and, when its preferences were distributed, the majority (83.4%) of them once again flowed to the Country Party. In Farrer none of the contests were decided on preferences because the sitting Liberal, David Fairbairn, held the seat with almost sixty-six per cent of the primary vote in 1955 and managed to maintain an absolute (though reduced) majority in subsequent elections. As in Riverina, the heaviest losses in the 1958 poll were inflicted on the conservative sitting member, with Fairbairn’s primary vote dropping by almost 7.8 per cent. At the same time there was greater leakage of ALP votes than in Riverina, with the DLP picking up 3.2 per cent from the ALP to take its total share of the poll to almost eleven per cent. Thereafter the DLP vote steadily declined and the biggest exchanges of primary votes took place directly between the ALP and the sitting Liberal.

When the DLP first contested the state seats of Wagga Wagga and Murrumbidgee (Griffith) both appeared to be ALP strongholds. In Wagga Wagga’s case, appearances were deceptive. Although the ALP’s E.H. (‘Eddie’) Graham had
won six successive elections and, at the time of his death in 1957, held the seat with over sixty per cent of the primary vote, the electorate’s demographics indicate that its voting population was undergoing significant change. The major influence was the rapidly expanding urban centre of Wagga Wagga, which dominated the electorate, overshadowing the nearby railway town of Junee (part of the electorate until the 1997-98 redistribution) as well as surrounding farming and grazing properties, for which it acted as a service centre. Between 1927 and 1941, when the seat of Wagga Wagga was held by the Country Party’s Matt Kilpatrick with majorities even larger than Graham’s, Wagga Wagga had a slowly declining agricultural workforce, a rapidly contracting manufacturing sector, and the greatest concentration of employment in commercial and financial institutions, many of them closely linked to primary production. In the years between 1947 and 1976 the commercial and financial sector expanded modestly from thirty-five per cent to around forty per cent of the workforce, but white collar public authority employment almost doubled to thirty-two per cent of the workforce.

This was a potential pool of Liberal Party support, as was evidenced in 1950, when the party ran its first candidate in Wagga Wagga. He succeeded in halving the Country Party’s share of the primary vote, and took nearly five per cent of the ALP vote in the process. Graham had quite consciously nurtured a personal vote, making no references to the ALP in his campaign brochure or policy statements, and it is plausible to suggest that these losses were conservative voters, who until then had been attracted by the ‘Minister for Wagga Wagga’s’ pork-barrelling propensities, his conservative political style and his diligence in servicing the electorate and assisting everyone who asked for help. The Liberal campaign had been organised by the twenty year old Wal Fife, who himself stood in 1953, making further inroads on the Country Party candidate and increasing the Liberal Party’s share of the vote to over twenty-seven per cent. Although there was a five per cent leakage of Country Party support to Graham, most of this was lost in 1956 in a two way contest with Fife who captured just short of forty per cent of the primary vote.

At the 1957 by-election the ALP candidate was Eddie’s Graham’s nephew Dudley Graham. Dudley was a poor, and to some a cynical, choice. According to the Sydney Morning Herald he ‘didn’t appear to have a clue, politically speaking’. Labor was relying on name recognition. The DLP, evidently understanding the
importance of personality in rural and regional contests, secured a strong, well known candidate in Jim Kennedy, a Catholic solicitor and senior partner in Walsh & Blair which handled most of the Diocesan legal work.  

The Country Party, which had not fielded a candidate in 1956, had some difficulty persuading Bill Lampe to nominate, but he was to prove surprisingly successful, almost doubling his party’s share of the poll and making heavy inroads on the ALP vote in Junee. Country Party intervention may well have been decisive in determining the outcome of the by-election because the overwhelming majority of Lampe’s preferences were directed to the Liberals. And, judging from the experience of other federal and state electorates in the Riverina region, it is also likely that DLP second preferences flowed in greater numbers to the more conservative Country Party than to the Liberals or the ALP.

Eather’s claim that the DLP take-over of the ALP’s Wagga Wagga branch seriously affected its local activity and electoral support is problematic because he offers little evidence about branches beyond noting that memberships in Wagga Wagga rarely exceeded fifty and meeting attendances were typically between ten and twenty. Successful ‘branch stacking’ by Catholic members of the ALP cannot have been difficult given that the Wagga Wagga branch voted thirty-six to six to join the DLP. Timing is another matter. The DLP coup occurred in October 1956, and a new ALP branch was not formed until February 1957. Eddie Graham’s sudden death on 13 November and a by-election set for 14 December 1957 must have posed a considerable challenge. The branch nevertheless campaigned heavily, concentrating much of its fire on the DLP. It retaliated by accusing the ALP of trading on an ‘honoured name’ by standing Dudley Graham. A further setback occurred when the president of the Junee ALP branch (who had been considered a potential candidate, but had been induced to stand aside in Graham’s favour) publicly withdrew support and joined the DLP, alleging Graham had not been a party member when preselected.

On polling day, in a seven way contest with three independents, two of them former ALP members, the ALP share of the primary vote was slashed to 35.5 per cent, while the Liberals secured 34.7 per cent and the Country Party 14 per cent. The DLP secured almost thirteen per cent, the largest share it would ever get in Wagga Wagga, undoubtedly because of the prominence of its candidate and the weakness of his ALP opponent. Kennedy’s campaigning will be discussed below, but it not
impossible that he was advantaged by a protest vote over the Cahill government’s retreat from its program of rural public works, which the local newspaper had flagged when it urged electors to vote Country Party and angrily editorialised that the Labor government was ‘dragging itself along … with but a shadow of its former usefulness’. Estimates of how preferences were distributed vary because data on the second to sixth counts is aggregated in Hughes and Graham’s *Voting for the New South Wales Legislative Assembly*. Blacklow quotes scrutineers who predicted that at least 60 per cent of DLP preferences and ninety per cent of Country Party preferences would flow to Fife, while Hagan, Turner and Blacklow put the flow of DLP preferences to the Liberals at about eighty per cent, giving Fife a decisive victory with fifty-nine per cent of the total poll. At the general election in 1959, Fife easily defeated Graham, securing fifty-five per cent of the primary vote. The DLP share was cut back to seven per cent.

The demographics of the Murrumbidgee electorate, held by the ALP with a large majority since 1941, were different from Wagga Wagga’s. More sparsely settled, with no population concentrations as big as the City of Wagga Wagga, Murrumbidgee had a small number of white collar public authority employees and a large number of persons working in primary industry: many of them self-employed, in mostly small, irrigated horticultural and agricultural enterprises, accounting for 34 per cent of the workforce as compared with 9.4 per cent of the workforce in the Wagga Wagga electorate, where broad acre farming and grazing increasingly predominated.

The DLP’s debut in Murrumbidgee in 1959 followed the same pattern as the Wagga Wagga by-election, with depredations inflicted on the sitting member, who was forced to preferences for the first time since 1941. He shed almost eight per cent of the primary vote, while his Country Party opponent dropped nearly twenty per cent. The major beneficiary was not the DLP (which captured just 4.4 per cent) but an independent candidate who at the next election stood for the Liberal Party. Despite a higher level of DLP support (just short of six per cent) in 1962, Liberals failed to dent the ALP’s ascendancy. Half the DLP preferences went to the Country Party, around thirty per cent to the Liberals, and the remainder to the sitting ALP member. At the 1965 election, when the ALP ran a new candidate, the DLP was no longer able to command sufficient votes to advantage the coalition parties.

**The influence of the Catholic vote**
Although there was a strong DLP vote along sectarian lines, it is important to recognise that this did not constitute a monolithic ‘Catholic vote’. West has pointed out that across New South Wales, where Catholics constituted 24.7 per cent of the voting population, the DLP captured 1.27 per cent of the total poll at the 1959 state election. Not all those DLP voters were Catholics, although the general consensus among researchers is that a majority were: the actual figures based on samples in the DLP strongholds of Queensland and Victoria, where around eighty per cent of DLP supporters in the 1958 federal election were said to be Catholics in good standing with the church. ‘Later,’ according to Warhurst, ‘the figure was lower: by 1969, only sixty-four per cent … were Catholics.’ In the Wagga Wagga electorate, where close to thirty-one per cent of the population was Catholic, the most support the party could rally was thirteen per cent of the poll in the 1957 by-election: a figure that may have been boosted by a non-sectarian protest vote, as suggested earlier in this article. Two years later it could rally just seven per cent in Wagga Wagga and only 4.4 per cent in Murrumbidgee, despite Catholics comprising almost forty-one per cent of that electorate’s population. This is far from being ‘the Catholic vote’ in either case.

There are two possible explanations why the DLP vote was stronger in Wagga Wagga than Murrumbidgee. First, there is the Wagga Wagga Catholic community’s links to B.A. Santamaria and the National Catholic Rural Movement (NCRM) of which Wagga’s Bishop Francis Henschke was the Patron and Episcopal Chairman and which ‘acted as “the Movement” in provincial areas’. The extent and nature of those links require more research, but it is significant that Henschke was involved in discussions with Santamaria and Archbishop Daniel Mannix when the Movement made the decision to sever its direct links with the Catholic Church. Second, there is the difference between Irish and Italian Catholicism. In spite of many of Griffith’s Italian migrants claiming Catholicism as their religion it is likely they did not identify with the dominant Irish Catholic approach to the faith which was such a feature of Catholicism in Australia.

According to the first explanation, Wagga Wagga’s Catholic community was strongly aligned with Santamaria and the Victorian DLP. The DLP branch in Wagga Wagga tended to reflect the ideas and interests of Victoria rather than those of New South Wales which was more ‘moderate and less influenced by Santamaria and his Movement’. The way the Wagga branch was formed is itself symptomatic. In
Victoria supporters of the anti-communist DLP overthrew the ALP and claimed to be the official Labor Party. But in New South Wales those expelled from the ALP for their association with the Movement were obliged to leave and form a new party. The Wagga Wagga split reflects the Victorian experience as a majority of its mainly Catholic membership simply took control of the local branch. It is unsurprising that Wagga Wagga should follow Victoria given its proximity to Melbourne and the powerful ideological influence of Bishop Henschke who acted as parish priest of the city’s cathedral parish and publicly supported the Movement. By contrast, Sydney’s Cardinal Gilroy instructed members of the Movement to remain with the ALP.29

In Wagga Wagga support for the Movement and the DLP was dependent on individuals like Jim Kennedy and Bill Brennan who also were members of the NCRM and founders of the rural Catholic settlement of San Isidore on Wagga’s western outskirts.30 Kennedy stood for Wagga Wagga in 1957, Brennan contested Farrer in 1958 and 1961, and Peter Piltz contested Wagga Wagga in 1968 and 1971. Much of their activity was organised from the Lady of Fatima Church in the new suburb of Turvey Park. Regular meetings of the NCRM were conducted from the church with the support of Fr Gallagher the parish priest. Brennan and Piltz were members of prominent Catholic families that had been pivotal in establishing the suburban church and were actively involved with its youth groups and councils. But, like Kennedy, neither could lay claim to having any rural links or a farming background. Interestingly, the DLP and the NCRM in Wagga Wagga were led by middle class suburban Catholics without links to agriculture.

The second explanation for the disparity in DLP support between Wagga Wagga and Griffith hinges on the assumption that it was Irish Catholicism which was driving the DLP, even though Santamaria’s own origins were Italian. He had aligned himself with Irish Catholicism, embarked on social action which its critics viewed as ‘Irish Catholic power play’,31 and helped establish an ethnic based party with a distinctive ideological position. It was anti communist, strong on defence, pro-family and saw itself as ‘middle of the road’ between big business Liberal Party interests and the pro-communist ALP.32

In Griffith, Italian Catholics had a different emphasis in their worship and church community to their Irish Catholic counterparts in Wagga Wagga. This can be traced to Papal efforts in the 1930s and 1940s. In 1936 the Pope dispatched an
Apostolic Delegate, Giovanni Panico, to Australia. The idea was to Romanise the Australian Catholic Church and reduce Irish influence. Panico’s intervention provoked sharp conflict with Mannix, the ‘determined chieftain of Irish Australian Catholicism’. The conflict between Italian and Irish-based Catholicism was again apparent in 1947 when Arthur Calwell, the Labor Minister for Immigration, wrote to the Papal Secretary of State and the Superior General of the Jesuits asking to have Panico recalled to Rome and a non-Italian appointed as his successor. Calwell also called for Mannix to be made a Cardinal. The Australian emphasis on Irish Catholicism and Mannix’s inability to accommodate differences in Catholic behaviour had isolated Italian Catholics from Australian church life. It is not surprising then that, despite Griffith having a high level of Catholics, few would have found any affinity with the DLP.

In the Griffith Italian speaking church there is little evidence to suggest a strong political element. The first solely Italian speaking church was founded in Griffith in 1940 during the period of the rivalry and influence of Panico, but there is nothing to suggest that the parish priest Fr Bongiorno or his successors during the 1950s and 1960s were preaching ‘politics from the pulpit’. The only evidence of a politically active church in Griffith showing traits of Catholic social teaching were the public lectures given on the threat of communism. In 1957, Griffith parish priest Fr Harper, gave a public lecture on his impressions of the impact communism was having overseas. He highlighted the problems of communist influence on the Church in Yugoslavia and the need for Australia to remain vigilant against communism domestically. The year before a visiting Jesuit, Fr Lawler, had come to Griffith to talk about Asia and the threat of communism but newspapers reported a small attendance.

Candidates and campaigns: possibilities for DLP support
There is the argument that, particularly in rural and regional electorates, the incumbent is always preferred regardless of political affiliation and tends to increase the margin at each election. Eddie Graham’s hold on the seat of Wagga Wagga is a classic example, with Graham regularly polling over sixty per cent of the primary vote. After Graham’s death, in the absence of a credible Labor candidate, the obvious choice for electors at the 1957 by-election was the Liberal Wal Fife, who had previously contested the seat in 1953 and 1956, increasing the Liberal share of the
vote to almost forty per cent. Thereafter, Fife went on to increase his primary vote from fifty-five per cent in 1959 to sixty-five per cent in 1965. In the seat of Murrumbidgee, George Enticknap had ousted the Country Party member Robert Hankinson during the state-wide turn to Labor in 1941. Although Enticknap suffered a decline in his primary vote in the late 1950s and 1960s when both the Country and the Liberal parties stood candidates, the seat was successfully transferred to Al Grassby in 1965. Grassby then successfully contested the federal seat of Riverina in 1969.

The experience of Fife and Grassby points to the importance of local personalities in rural and regional politics. Both men had spent time building up local branches and consolidating support within their respective communities. Fife worked in a main-street family produce business, was active in the Junior Chamber of Commerce, had organised the Liberal Party’s campaign in 1950 and contested the seat in 1953 and 1956. Grassby developed contacts in the farming community during service as an agricultural field officer and used those contacts to establish and revitalise Labor Party branches. Both individuals had acquired a high profile in their respective communities. The ‘personality thesis’ also helps explain the demise of Grassby in the seat of Riverina at the 1974 federal election amidst what some of his Northern Italian supporters ‘perceived as [his] cover-up for South Italians implicated in drug and murder scandals’.38 His primary vote decreased from 54.7 per cent to 47.8 per cent and he lost ground to a well known and respected Griffith businessman and anti-drug crusader Donald Mackay, standing as a Liberal, who took eighteen per cent of the vote and gave his preferences to the successful Country Party candidate John Sullivan.

Now it might be conjectured that part of the reason for the high levels of support attracted by DLP candidates like Kennedy and Brennan was that they grasped the importance of personality as well as the need for credible campaign strategies that addressed local issues of concern to electors. The party entered the Wagga Wagga by-election in 1957 with a high profile candidate in Kennedy. He was a respected solicitor and widely known in the community for his good works. At the launch of his campaign the DLP stated its platform on local and rural based issues. It would focus on housing, decentralisation of industries, a Riverina university and better hospital facilities. It claimed it would lobby for a new base hospital and encourage the Rural
Bank to make more finance available to cooperative societies as a means to combat high interest rates on hire purchase. It also wanted to establish flood mitigation projects, develop more dams and increase the powers of local government.39 The platform was sound and appealing to a rural electorate. It offered a blend of social services, capital works and fiscal initiatives which complemented the broader philosophy of the NCRM. The campaign also commenced on a positive note with Kennedy embarking on a tour of the region.

But the DLP chose to campaign negatively against the ALP’s Dudley Graham. It disseminated accusations that he had only recently joined the ALP and was actually preselected before he had obtained membership. Despite it being a state by-election, the DLP also chose to use Evatt and his dwindling public support for its own ends, repeatedly asking why the federal opposition leader did not come and support the local ALP candidate. This criticism of the ALP and Evatt marks a change in campaign strategy. From the initial policy platform of local and state issues there was a drift toward broader ideological arguments. In some respects, the campaign appears to have been hijacked from outside the local sphere by federal politicians unfamiliar with voter behaviour in regional electorates. The DLP’s Senator for Tasmania, George Cole, arrived to assist Kennedy and spoke publicly about the dangers of communism. Thereafter a large portion of Kennedy’s reported speeches focus on ‘fighting communism’ and Australia’s move toward socialism. There was little said about local issues. The campaign message which had begun with local issues was now lost to the extent that Kennedy’s final words to the Wagga Wagga public, through the medium of its local newspaper, comprised rhetorical flourishes about domestic communism and the need for a foreign policy which stopped communism overseas. In comparison the ALP, Liberal and Country Party candidates all continued to focus on local and state based issues. None of them pursued communism as an election issue, making Kennedy seem out of step with the general sentiment of the campaign.40 The outside support that he received was not replicated in following elections in the seat of Wagga Wagga until 1971, but campaigning followed the anti-communist line, and support for the party’s somewhat lower profile candidates steadily contracted from the 1957 peak.

In the Riverina electorate, during the 1958 federal election, the DLP put forth an unknown candidate against the sitting member Hugh S. Roberton, the Minister for...
Social Services. Roberton held the seat with a generous margin, and was widely known through his journalism (as ‘Peter Snodgrass’ in *The Land* newspaper) and membership of the Farmers and Settlers’ Association of New South Wales. The DLP apparently did not expect to unseat the Country Party member nor capture any vote from the ALP, choosing Peter Rolfe, a thirty year old irrigation farmer from Finley as its candidate. Rolfe could only list his interests in cricket, tennis and golf and express his political qualifications by highlighting membership and involvement in farming groups. The campaign lacked any assistance from DLP senators. There were no regular media releases and display advertisements were styled on negative campaigning and were few in number. They highlighted the DLP’s opposition to socialism and communism. Display advertisements used quotes by Evatt and the Australian Communist Party leader to demonstrate the close connection between the ALP and the Communist Party. In the candidate’s final statements before the election the DLP again failed to sell its policy position choosing to run a short piece which argued that the DLP was the first party to launch its policies. However, its policies were never widely reported nor advertised.

In comparison the ALP was far more active in its campaigning. Grazier Jack Ward had secured preselection and was immediately vocal on a number of issues. The local ALP branch was also fortunate to have the Griffith newspaper’s support. Each month the *Area News* reported Griffith branch meetings and featured its opinions on a range of issues. For example, it was vocal in the lead up to the election over Wade Shire Council’s attempts to establish a ‘coloured’ bar for Aboriginals in Griffith. The ALP was also conscious about effective advertising. It conducted a display advertisement campaign which rivalled the sitting member’s. The result in what the local paper described as a ‘quiet election’ was that the ALP lost just 0.4 per cent of its share of the vote to the DLP, whereas the sitting Country Party member shed more than five per cent.

In Farrer, at the 1958 federal election, the sitting Liberal Party member David Fairbairn started with a comfortable margin. The DLP candidate was Wagga’s Bill Brennan, the local agent for the Australian Catholic Insurance Agency with five years experience on Wagga Wagga City Council. Brennan had also worked with Kennedy in the NCRM and was a key planner of the San Isidore settlement. In launching his campaign, Brennan singled out child endowment, the abolition of sales and payroll
tax, government home loan guarantees, and the hypothecation of fuel taxes for roads.\textsuperscript{43} Tactfully, and perhaps strategically, Brennan did not articulate his or the DLP’s position on state aid for non-government schools. During the late 1950s and into the 1960s school enrolments had rapidly expanded and the federal government was called to assist with the need greater resources. The issue was contentious with some arguing that federal government assistance to non-public schools was essentially assistance for Catholic schools.\textsuperscript{44} While it is impossible to be certain, it is probable that Brennan and Rolfe may avoided the issue in order to down play the party’s association with the Catholic Church and not alienate non-Catholics using the DLP to deliver a protest vote. The other candidates did not addresses the issue of state aid either, choosing instead to run on other more local issues.

As with Kennedy during the Wagga Wagga by-election, external influences soon appeared on the campaign trail. After the Reverend Dr Mannix had an article published on the front page of the \textit{Daily Advertiser}, warning that Evatt was a communist sympathiser and urging readers to vote against the ALP, Brennan switched to anti-communist rhetoric.\textsuperscript{45} He called on electors not to vote for Evatt but made no connection between him and Garland, the local ALP candidate. Once again there was a marked shift from campaigning on local issues toward the broader and more ideological front of anti-communism. But this did not prevent Brennan from capturing a respectable 10.96 per cent of the primary vote.

These three examples raise the question of exactly what attracted electors to the DLP. Eather’s view, that the party’s main attraction lay in its anti-communism in a situation where Wagga Wagga was a hotbed of ‘anti-communist paranoia’, seems overstated. For instance, he himself concedes that its local paper, the \textit{Daily Advertiser}, ‘was generally outdone in the stridency of its response by other regional newspapers like the \textit{Cootamundra Daily Herald} or the \textit{Gundagai Independent}’.\textsuperscript{46} And while anti-communism presumably did attract at least some electors, it might reasonably be surmised from the 1958 experience in the Riverina electorate that the party had little appeal when anti-communism was not tempered by a thoughtful platform disseminated by a credible candidate, well known in the local community.

The point is further underlined by the marked rise in the DLP vote in the state electorate of Wagga Wagga in 1971. This peak was its highest since the DLP first campaigned in the by-election of 1957 and was the result of a most vigorous
campaign fought on rural issues. The DLP candidate was Peter Piltz, a radio engineer and member of a respected Catholic family active in the local community. Piltz was running against the sitting member and Minister for Mines Wal Fife and the ALP’s Jack Skeers. In this election there were a number of factors working in the DLP’s favour. The DLP’s campaign appeared highly polished with regular media exposure of its policies. With the struggle between the ‘east’ and ‘west’ in a period of détente, communism was not a major issue and the DLP focussed on public concern surrounding decentralisation and rural development.

Much of rural Australia was in crisis during this period. The long post war ‘boom’ was at an end and many of the benefits farmers had received through subsidised agriculture were now being cut back. Farmers were receiving lower prices for commodities and rural towns were suffering for it. The major parties responded with the release of a range of policies to assist in developing rural and regional New South Wales through decentralisation and restructuring of the rural economy. As expected, the DLP released it plan in the lead up to the state election. The policy aimed to establish a National Rural Finance Corporation that would make low interest loans to farmers over a twenty-five year period. The loans would re-finance debt and provide an interest free period. The corporation would also lend money for farmers to leave unviable properties and start city businesses or undertake training to take up other employment. The DLP also promised to establish a commission comprised of rural and economic experts to examine problems in rural industries and recommend future policies. The ALP responded by promising to divide country New South Wales into seven regions which would be targeted for development. Its policy offered a mixture of decentralisation, readjustment loans to farmers, subsidised interest payments, alteration of the system for rating rural land and initiatives intended to provide employment in rural areas through decentralising government departments.

It is not surprising that the ALP and DLP were attacking each others’ rural policies. But in many respects the incumbent Wal Fife and Liberal state government were sidelined from the debate. Neither the ALP nor DLP was overly critical of Fife or the Liberal Party’s rural policies. Instead, Piltz challenged Skeers to debate which policy would best address the rural crisis. Playing on the rural voters’ sense of localism, Piltz accused Skeers of supporting an ALP policy that would see Bathurst
and Orange targeted for development and Wagga Wagga ignored. Skeers was in a difficult position and was forced to admit that, while he supported Labor’s decentralisation policy, he disagreed with the state ALP leader Pat Hills because Wagga Wagga was not targeted. Skeers attempted to distance himself from the ALP on this issue and chose to promote the work he had done in Wagga Wagga through his involvement with the Chamber of Commerce and the Wagga Wagga City Council’s decentralisation committee.50

In addition to attacking the local ALP candidate, the DLP also shaped its campaign to target those voters disillusioned with the major parties. Capitalising on industrial action between teachers and the Liberal government, Piltz commented that the government had been silent about the issue while the ALP was simply following directions from the Teachers’ Federation. Furthermore, neither party could reach agreement on how much funding should be given to private schools. Piltz had meanwhile received constructive support from senior party figures. The DLP’s state leader K.C. Davis accompanied by Senator Jack Kane had visited Wagga Wagga to outline its rural policy and the federal deputy leader Senator McManus had followed up with another visit just days before the election. Both visits had received widespread media attention and carried a similar message—that more needed to be done for rural communities. Policy and local concerns continued to drive the DLP campaign right to the end. In the final message, printed the day before the election, Piltz called for a Riverina university and government interest subsidies as well guaranteed loans for home purchasers.51

At the end of the 1971 campaign the sitting member was comfortably returned and the ALP retained its status as the most obvious alternative to the Liberal Party’s Fife. Piltz, while securing the most support received by the DLP since the 1957 Wagga Wagga by-election, managed to attract less than 1600 votes (something over seven per cent of the poll). Yet the increase shows what good campaigning and the right candidate can achieve in a seat where the incumbent enjoys over fifty per cent of the primary vote.

**Conclusion**

While further research is required into Riverina Catholics voting along sectarian lines, it is possible to discount suggestions that the DLP had taken the region’s ‘Catholic vote’ from the ALP. In spite of exertions by Wagga Wagga’s Bishop Henschke and
the NCRM, the average level of DLP support across the region over time was low in relation to the very large number of Catholic voters in its electorates, and the party’s organisers as well as Catholic religious leaders were demonstrably less effective in mobilising voters (Catholic or otherwise) in the federal electorate of Riverina or the state seat of Murrumbidgee than they were in electorates of Wagga Wagga and Farrer. Moreover, with the exception of the 1957 Wagga Wagga by-election, the DLP inflicted its most serious depredations on sitting Liberal and Country Party members in the federal electorates of Riverina and Farrer. Impacts on the ALP in both electorates were negligible in comparison to inroads on the coalition parties’ share of the vote. The propensity for fifty to eighty per cent of DLP second preferences to flow back to Country Party members in these circumstances raises the possibility that the DLP was providing a vehicle for protest votes on the part of disgruntled, ultra-conservative Country Party members, some of them almost certainly not Catholics.

The situation with the sitting ALP members in the state electorates of Wagga Wagga and Murrumbidgee is more complicated. In Murrumbidgee the DLP consistently attracted lower levels of support. While it stripped votes from the sitting ALP member, its depredations were comparable to those of an independent who made greater inroads on the Country Party vote and afterwards stood as a Liberal, but again failed to dislodge the ALP incumbent. The distribution of DLP preferences is nonetheless noteworthy, with half flowing to the Country Party, about a third to the Liberals, and the remainder to the ALP. Suggestions that DLP second preferences played a more decisive role in determining the outcome of the 1957 Wagga Wagga by-election need to take more account of the complex situation that presented with the unexpected death in office of a popular and long-serving ALP member whose survival in an electorate with a rapidly expanding white collar, public authority workforce owed much to his personal conservatism and his distancing himself from his ALP affiliation. Eather’s sweeping assertions about the potency of anti-communism and sectarian voting notwithstanding, there are too many variables at work to see the DLP as other than one of many proximate factors, and perhaps not a terribly important one at that. Without the DLP in the field it is likely that the Country Party would have made a stronger showing and produced the same outcome. Over time in Wagga Wagga the Country Party has shown a capacity to lie dormant in the electorate and
then capture significant numbers of voters, as Jim Booth’s respectable showing for the Nationals in 1999 makes clear.52

Where the DLP was successful in securing particularly strong support, it had a blend of local personalities, relevant issues and an aggressive campaign strategy. The DLP performed most poorly when it stuck to broad issues of anti-communism and used candidates lacking profile in the main cities and towns of the region’s state and federal electorates. Its most outstanding candidates in the Riverina region were Kennedy, Brennan and Piltz. The last of these is especially interesting because he succeeded so well in reversing the party’s downward slide. As a known personality who had contested two successive elections and addressed public concern about the rural crisis and the ALP’s decentralisation policy, Piltz was further advantaged because support from federal DLP figures was not contradictory to his message and reinforced the issues important to the electorate. That neither he nor the ALP secured greater traction in the region underscores the point about rural and regional electors preferring trusted incumbents.

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5 Warwick Eather, ‘Hysteria in the Bush: Wagga Wagga and the “anti-communist frenzy”, 1945-60’, Australian Journal of Politics and History, vol. 43 no. 3, 1997, pp.331-43. The local DLP supporters’ view is drawn directly from the words of ‘the very lengthy resolution’ (p. 341) they passed when seceding from the ALP.
10 The average DLP vote in Victoria in the 1958 federal election was almost fifteen per cent.
11 Area News, 5 December 1958. The authors recognise that the losses for one candidate need not be congruent with the gains for another, but have adopted the approximation for reasons of space and simplicity.
12 Allan, p. 31.
13 Blacklow, p. 175.
14 According to Warwick Eather, ‘The Rise and Fall of a Provincial Trades and Labor Council: the Wagga Wagga and District Trades and Labor Council 1943-1978’, Rural Society, vol. 9 no. 1, 1999, pp. 341-2, these qualities were shared by Graham and Fife and explain why they were ‘essentially unbeatable’.


17 Eather, ‘Rise and Fall’, p. 342.


19 Hagan, Turner and Blacklow, p. 212.

20 Daily Advertiser, 28 November 1957.


22 Daily Advertiser, 10 December 1957.

23 Hagan, Turner and Blacklow, p. 211.


26 Patrick Morgan (ed.), B.A. Santamaria. Your most obedient servant, Carlton, 2007, p. xiv. Warwick Eather, ““Extirminate the Traitors”: the Wagga Wagga and District Trades and Labor Council, trade unionism and the Wagga Wagga community 1943-60’, Labour History, No. 72, 1997, p.115 cites oral testimony concerning a group of Wagga Wagga Catholics, mostly professionals, self-employed business people and union officials, who ‘did not always have the support of the clergy’ but actively campaigned across the region in support of the industrial groups and the DLP. Richard Doig, The National Catholic Rural Movement and a ‘New Deal’ for Australia: the rise and fall of an agrarian movement 1931-1958, PhD thesis, Charles Sturt University, 2005, chapters 9 and 10 makes use of extensive correspondence from the NCRM archives, still in Mr Santamaria’s possession when Doig conducted his research, which demonstrates the closeness of Henschke’s links to both Santamaria and Mannix as well as the bishop’s concerns over the potential impact of the Movement on local support for the NCRM.


28 Fitzgerald, p. 158.

29 Fitzgerald, p. 159.

30 Denholm, ‘San Isidore’, p. 249.


32 Allan, p. 30.


34 Cappello, p.60.

35 Richard Hall, ‘Should you ever go across the sea from Ireland’, Eureka Street, March 1995, p. 25.

36 Cappello, p. 70.

37 Daily Advertiser, 30 November 1956.

38 Hagan, Turner and Blacklow, p. 228.


40 Daily Advertiser, 5 December 1957.


50 Daily Advertiser, 4 January 1971.

51 Daily Advertiser, 23 February 1971.

52 Hagan, Turner and Blacklow, p. 213.